

North Italy Wine Country

While visiting northern Italy, one of our favorite areas was "Piemonte" English spelling Piedmont. Surrounded on two sides by the Alps in the countries of France, Switzerland, Austria and Croatia, the cross border customs make for some very interesting surroundings. The area is mostly rural with its many hill top communities making up about 60 % of the population. Milano/Milan and Torino/Turin are the two populace areas.

Although a drive from Milan's airport might be the quickest way to reach Piedmont (about two and a half hours on the autostrada if you drive like an Italian), you can drive east from Nice, France or south from Geneva Switzerland for about four (4) hours.

Besides the wines, another reason to go to Piedmont is that it's off the beaten tourist track. You go to Piedmont for two reasons: the food and the wine. If you love white truffles on your pasta or risotto, you visit in the autumn; the area around the town of Alba is the world's prime source for this rare delicacy.

Driving from Alba to Barolo you will get a real feel for the hillsides of grapes and all the picture perfect little towns along the way. It is all about hills with the towns on the top and grapes growing all the way down and in the valley. The roads are all narrow and windy and the towns well protected as a result of turf wars centuries ago.

As wine tourists, these hilltop communities represent fantastic wines crafted from their indigenous Barolo, Barbera and Dolcetto grapes. While the towns of Asti and Alba are the areas two regional centers we were interested in the community of Barolo and the eleven (11) surrounding hill top communities. Asti is of course famous for Asti Spumante while Italy's well known everyday wine is Barbera d' Asti and Barbera d' Alba.

Now for the 11 towns surrounding Barolo: Grinzane Cavour, Ciano di Alba, Roddi, Verduno, La Mora, Novello, Cherasco, Monforte d'Alba, Castiglione Falletto, Serralunga d' Alba and Barolo. These towns will give you the flavor of "rural" Italy. The photos attached should entice you there not only for the wines but the Old Italy ambiance.

If you are just interested in tasting the wines I suggest you find their Enotecas Regionale with one of them being in Grinzane Cavour for the Barolo region. Often these Enotecas are in wonderfully preserved castles which you will enjoy as well. Here they will feature all the different wines produced in the region and show no favoritism to any one producer or grape.

If you want to "wine tour" by the towns there are an awful lot of wineries that will welcome you and there you can understand their particular propensity to making wine be it a Barolo, Barberesco, Niebieolo or Dolcetto among others.

One of the more interesting visits to a particular winery was that of GiGi Rosso as you leave Alba to drive to Barolo. Seagrams has invested millions of dollars in this region since early in the 60's. This early start allowed GiGi to look over and buy the best of the vineyards for Seagrams as well for himself. Today GiGi has 72 acres of vineyards for himself which by Piemonte standards is large.

He has been in the wine business for 55 years and was the original President of the Barolo Marketing Association. By happenstance we were invited to sit in on a presentation of their wines conducted by GiGi himself. Through his interpreter he took us back to the very beginning for some history and tradition and how their ultra modern facilities have allowed them to chase perfection.

The winery produces 21,000 cases of DOC and DOCG wine. These are standards the wine industry of Italy holds the local producers to and allows them certain rights to label their wine, market and price accordingly. In this region and maybe all of Italy, Barolo is the king with Barberesco the big brother and Dolcetto the little. These wines are made from the same Nebbiolo grape although with different production standards.

We enjoyed this area and of course it is one of many in Italy and visiting the different regions is a small part of Italy's attractions although Italian wines are enjoyed all over the world.